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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet offers questions, comments and suggestions to guide high school principals and high school students and their parents in evaluating overseas summer study programs. The main questions one should ask are: (1) Who is the program operator and how do you check him out? (2) What are the aims and objectives of the program? (3) What is the program of study? (4) How does the program actually operate? and (5) What are the financial and administrative arrangements? A final word of caution points out that due to the absence of an overall effective accrediting group, no uniformly accepted standards or controls exist; therefore, "let the buyer beware." This is meant to warn against and help identify self-seeking organizations with little or no interest in education or experience in the development of sound, well-balanced educational tours. Frustration, financial loss and educationally weak experiences can be avoided by careful examination of travel study offerings. (TL)

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Overseas Summer Study Programs

What Students, Parents, and Principals Should Ask

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National Association of Secondary School Principals
Reston, Virginia

Preface

ONE of the most exciting and potentially valuable ventures in education is the intensive overseas summer study tour for high school students. Young people can discover literally new worlds as a result of well-organized, properly operated overseas programs. For many students, travel-study programs are a positive, pleasant, enriching way to explore new places and ways of life.

On the other hand, students can also be victimized by self-seeking organizations which may, in fact, have little or no interest or experience in developing sound, well-balanced educational tours. For some students and their parents, the programs offered by unscrupulous or inept operators result in frustration, financial loss, or educationally weak experiences.

It is not always easy to identify the fraudulent or questionable operators, largely because the great variety of programs now available makes it impossible to study each program's educational value and financial stability. Nevertheless, it is possible to raise questions which will help in examining a travel-study offering.

The questions, comments, and suggestions which follow are offered as a guide to principals, students, and parents and as a recommended beginning point for inquiry. Accurate and substantive replies to these questions will indicate much; but, of course, even the most favorable replies cannot guarantee the educational effectiveness of a program. In other words, there simply is no substitute for thorough study and informed, careful judgment on the part of those involved.

Who Is the Program Operator and How Do You Check Him Out?

Basically there are four types of travel-study program operators.

- *Academic:* officially recognized and accredited educational institutions (universities, colleges, public and private secondary schools) offering travel-study programs to their own students and occasionally others; usually responsible to an accrediting agency.
- *Religious, Fraternal, Service:* church or temple groups, fraternal orders, community service organizations offering selective, restricted programs in line with the objectives of their own group; generally not answerable or responsible to outside agencies.
- *Private, educationally oriented:* non-profit groups that range from highly reputable to questionable or dishonest "post-office box" operations; often have impressive listings of Board members and classify themselves as "Schools," "Institutes" or "Colleges;" generally not answerable or responsible to outside agencies.
- *Commercial:* profit-making organizations that range from effective and worthwhile to financially exploitive; in some instances concerned primarily with transportation, lodging, and tours, and in other instances offering a sound, supervised academic program; sometimes responsive to external agencies, such as Better Business Bureaus, or International Air Transport Association.

Any reputable organization offering a travel-study program wants to maintain and build up its reputation. It therefore has nothing to hide and

stands ready to answer legitimate inquiries from prospective clients. Parents, students and principals should ask questions, require reasonable verification, be skeptical, and seek clarification in writing of vague statements and claims.

Sometimes the name of the travel-study sponsor differs from that of the organization bearing legal responsibility for program and travel arrangements. Problems, difficulties, and confusions may arise in such situations. KNOW PRECISELY WITH WHOM TO DEAL.

Check out the program operator by:

1. Identifying the agency bearing legal responsibility if there is any hint that it may be different from the promoting organization.
2. Determining whether the organization has an official base in the United States that would be legally responsible in the event complications occur that require legal action. (All business arrangements involve the risk of misunderstanding or even breach of contractual obligations. As an American citizen, you might find it difficult or impossible to protect your legal interests in a dispute with a foreign organization unless it maintains some form of official representation in the United States that would be responsible under U.S. laws.)
3. Carefully reading advertisements to determine how long the organization has been offering study-tours, the amount of direct supervision it exercises abroad, and the composition of its board of advisers, if any.
4. Corresponding with educators or advisers named in the advertisements.
5. Addressing inquiries to parents or students who have previously participated. (If the sponsoring organization is reluctant to supply names and addresses, that in itself is significant.)
6. Inquiring among people who have served as leaders or chaperones of the sponsoring organization in previous years.
7. Finding out how the sponsoring organization handles references. (If it requests that the applicant secure written references and attach them to the application form at the time of submission, one may infer that these references are of little importance.)

8. Making a confidential request for information, by phone, to the Supervisor of Foreign Languages in your State Department of Education.
9. Calling the International Programs Committee Office at the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) in Reston, Virginia.

What Are the Aims and Objectives of the Program?

Most travel-study operators emphasize one or more of the following activities as integral to their program:

- Travel and sightseeing.
- Foreign language experience.
- Cultural contact.
- Study in a specific field or area, with reading, exercises, and discussions professionally administered and validated by tests and reports.

A careful analysis of the program, including the day-by-day schedule, should indicate which of these activities receive primary emphasis. The day-by-day schedule should also reveal how consistent the program is with its stated objectives.

It goes without saying that students and parents need to understand their own reasons for wanting to participate in a travel-study program. These reasons, of course, should be consonant with the objectives of the program finally selected.

Travel, sightseeing, exposure to another language, and general cultural contacts in foreign countries, if wisely organized and operated, can be enriching, highly educational, personal experiences. They are not to be confused, however, with formalized study. Technically, study (especially if academic credit is involved) consists of a genuine intellectual effort to acquire a particular body of knowledge by means of reading, discussion, and exercises.

What Is the Program of Study?

Some announcements imply that the program of study is offered in or through a foreign school or university under master teachers or university professors. Experience has shown that in some in-

stances students in summer travel-study programs may be enrolled in special courses for foreigners, or they may be taught by specially hired instructors in otherwise empty schools or universities. The experience may be devoid of any intercultural contact other than that provided by the presence of a foreign instructor.

The style of learning at most schools abroad tends to follow a more rigid pattern than in the United States. American students should be prepared to adjust to a teacher-centered, lecture-type instruction which often does not provide opportunity to ask questions or participate in seminar-type activities. This condition may be partially offset if teachers accompany their classes during related field trips.

The study phase of some study-travel tours offers little more cultural contact than might be arranged in a stateside classroom. The program should be examined with care and additional information requested where needed. Parents and students should know:

1. The exact calendar and time schedule of the study-travel tour.
2. The language of instruction and the linguistic requirements for participation in courses.
3. The courses that are offered.
4. The content of the courses.
5. The relationship between tours and courses.
6. The academic and attendance control over the program.

An important point to remember: No organization sponsoring a travel-study program can legitimately assert or imply that credit will be granted by a student's home school for participation in their program. *The conditions under which credit is granted lie completely in the hands of local school authorities.*

How Does the Program Actually Operate?

If the instructional portion of the program is of importance to the student or the parents, the conditions under which instruction is given and the background, experience, and qualifications of the

teachers are critical. The use of foreign teachers without any special training is not a panacea. Similarly, shifting an American teacher to a classroom overseas does not automatically qualify that teacher for a foreign study program assignment. Teachers and/or chaperones should be selected solely on the basis of their professional fitness for the assignment and NOT on their ability to recruit student participants for the program. In fact, *staff selection in no way should be connected with recruiting student participants.* Adults traveling and teaching students in an overseas setting must have specific skills and competencies for working with young people on an informal yet effective basis.

Parents should determine:

1. If the tour director is carefully selected and likely to understand and work effectively with American students.
2. If the tour director is familiar with the countries to be visited—culture, languages, and customs.
3. If the teachers and chaperones who accompany the group are chosen on the basis of their suitability for this demanding assignment.
4. If foreign teachers have been selected on the basis of professional competence, experience, and ability to work with the age group to be served.
5. The extent to which the tour schedule provides for continuous access to chaperones by participants. Parents of high school age students should require clarification of a statement that participants will have large segments of "free time" to explore the foreign culture "on their own." Different customs, culture shock, even homesickness, greatly increase the need for the constant presence of a wise and understanding counselor, not merely a "chaperone."

Prospective student participants should be selected just as carefully as teachers and chaperones. Not every high school student is ready for a summer abroad, away from parents and family in an at least partially unsupervised setting. If a program accepts anyone who applies and pays the fee, you should seriously question its overall merit. Parents

and students should closely examine all promotional materials to determine:

1. If appropriate language requirements are listed.
2. What age levels are accepted.
3. If letters of general recommendation are required.
4. If school recommendations are required.
5. What learning experiences are expected of students while in the program.

What Are the Financial and Administrative Arrangements?

Parents turn over something much more valuable than money when they entrust their children to a summer travel-study program; nevertheless, complete financial information is very important and not always easy to come by. Similarly, although emergencies cannot invariably be anticipated, parents will want to be sure that arrangements have been made to cope with illnesses, accidents, or other unusual circumstances. Be certain to determine:

1. The financial status of the organization, including the name of the company holding its bond and the bonding coverage.
2. How the rates compare with those quoted by organizations offering similar study-travel opportunities.
3. If basic fees include: all transportation costs; taxi and bus fares; tours and side-trip costs; medical, accident, and baggage insurance fees; all meals.
4. If medical and dental services will be available overseas.
5. If provision is made for full or partial refund of fees in the event of any sort of cancellation. (Most programs legitimately collect a modest nonrefundable deposit to cover administrative costs and to limit the number of costly last-minute cancellations. However, a substantial nonrefundable registration fee required with the application may be evidence of an inadequate selection process.)

6. If there are adequate plans for promptly returning home any participant who is in serious difficulty. (Since most study tours are based on special rates, extra charges could reach $300 to $400 if a participant has to return before the rest of the group.)

A Final Word of Caution

The rapid growth of interest in overseas study programs during the past decade is clearly evident. It is also apparent that the volume of services needed for these programs is great; as a result, many distinctly different agencies now are involved in study-travel programs for high school students. In the absence of any overall effective accrediting group, no uniformly accepted standards or controls exist, and so the rule of *Caveat Emptor*—Let the Buyer Beware—is especially important.

NASSP advises parents and students to:

- Be skeptical.
- Ask questions.
- Insist on reasonable verification for all claims.

NASSP advises principals and other school authorities to:

- Develop written policies on the basis of the suggestions in this booklet.
- Give copies of your policies or this booklet to teachers, counselors, board members and others in the school system who may come into contact in any way with overseas study program operators.
- Help students and parents obtain the information needed to make wise decisions but *refrain from endorsing any specific program.*
- Require all agencies promoting foreign study programs in or through the schools to register in advance with school authorities, to provide evidence of bonding, and to submit copies of all advertising and promotional materials.

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